

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE C-5WASHINGTON POST
25 September 1983

Is the Press Being Duped

The tale of a phony CIA document suggests the dangers

By George C. Wilson

TWO WASHINGTON columnists, Jack Anderson and Jody Powell, have been trading charges of late about who has the documents to prove or disprove whether former President Carter was reckless when it came to planning the rescue of Americans held hostage in Tehran in 1980.

Well, I have one of the documents in contention. I am satisfied it is a forgery. But the way I got it, what it says and how it surfaced after The Washington Post decided it was not worth printing give an insight into how the disinformation game is sometimes played in Washington, especially in a presidential election year. The episode also illustrates how a persistent disinformers, by trying a number of avenues in the loosely structured world that is "the press," can get his information into print.

First came the telephone calls, both to the office and to my home, from August into September 1980. This was after the failed rescue attempt of April 1980 but before the November election which pitted Ronald Reagan against Jimmy Carter. The caller, often in a tense voice, said he had been part of a special CIA team which had estimated that 60 percent of the American hostages would have been killed or severely wounded if the rescue operation approved by Carter had gone all the way through rather than been aborted at Desert One. If true, this would have been political dynamite for anti-Carterites. It would make Carter look to many as reckless when it came to risking American lives.

I of course told the anonymous caller that we would need documentation before considering whether to write the story about the alleged CIA study. After weeks of telephone conversations with the anonymous caller, who dubbed himself "Lloyd," he agreed to send the CIA document to The Post. It arrived in a plain manilla envelope with an out-of-town postmark and a return address that did not check out as real.

The document inside was stamped "Eyes Only." It was dated 16 March 1980. It looked like a crude imitation of a secret document and raised my suspicions in its second line, which read: "Subject: OPLAN EAGLE CLAW Loss Estimate." I happened to know at the time that the secret code name of the overall rescue operation, as distinguished from its individual elements, was not Eagle Claw but Rice Bowl.

I copied the document on a Washington Post typewriter and took that copy to the Pentagon. If "Lloyd" and his document were genuine, government experts might be able to trace the peculiarities of his document back to him. I figured I should protect him against this detective work until I had checked out his offering for authenticity. The politically damning sentences for Carter in Lloyd's document were these: "Best estimates are that a loss rate of 60 percent could be expected in a moderately successful (sic) operation. CA and M & P Staff concur." Under recommendations, the document said: "1. That the JCS and key mission personnel revise the OPLAN to simplify the key elements. 2. That OPLAN EAGLE CLAW NOT be utilized in its current form."

Through the offices of Thomas B. Ross, then assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, I took the copy of Lloyd's document to a general on the Joint Chiefs of Staff who had helped plan and execute the aborted Iranian rescue mission. He pronounced it a forgery; said he had heard of no loss estimates by anybody approaching 60 percent, and questioned whether there was a CIA unit called CA and M & P.

Lloyd called me after that session with the JCS general. I asked him what the real code name was of the rescue operation. He could not tell me. I asked him what the CIA unit was, and he said, "Covert Action and Mission Programs." He called the next day and left word with the national desk of The Post that the code name of the operation was Rice Bowl. By that time I had talked by telephone to Frank Carlucci, then deputy director of the CIA. He said that he had never heard of anything in his agency called CA and M & P. I sent the agency a copy of my typewritten copy of Lloyd's "eyes only" submission. After the CIA had exam-

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ined it, its spokesman termed the document "a total fabrication." Ross informed Jody Powell, then Carter's press secretary, about the document and apparently sent my copy of it to him. Ross and I suspected it was an attempt at disinformation to hurt Carter's re-election chances.

That might have been the end of the story if Lloyd and/or his fellow operatives had not been so persistent. I have no way of knowing what telephone calls they made to other news people or what documents they may have mailed to them. Columnist Anderson would have been a likely prospect because of several columns he had written in August 1980 asserting that Carter was planning a second rescue mission. Anderson's Aug. 19 column said "Jimmy Carter has ordered preparations for a limited invasion of Iran. For planning purposes, D-Day has been set in October on the eve of the election. Troubled planners suspect that Carter has been"

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